

Variant Readings: Why Didn't Muhammad Intervene?¹

Extant hadith literature recounts several incidents during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime wherein disputes arose among his Companions due to divergent recitations of the Quran. Four prominent narratives detail such occurrences.

The most widely cited incident involves Umar and Hisham ibn Hakim. In this account, Umar physically accosted Hisham, seizing him by the collar and forcibly bringing him to the Prophet. Upon recitation by both Umar and Hisham, the Prophet reportedly validated both versions, stating, "All of them are correct; the Quran was revealed in seven ahruf."¹

A second incident features Ubay who, upon entering the mosque, encountered two individuals reciting the Quran in a manner unfamiliar to him. Subsequently, Ubay brought the matter to the Prophet's attention, and all three of them recited before him. Again, the Prophet affirmed the legitimacy of all readings. Notably, this episode is reported to have triggered in Ubay a level of doubt regarding Muhammad's prophethood exceeding even his pre-Islamic skepticism.²

Further incidents involve Ibn Mas'ud and another individual,³ and Amr ibn al-'as and yet another person.⁴ In each of these cases, a similar pattern emerges: the Prophet consistently validated all presented recitations, informing his Companions of the Quran's revelation in seven ahruf.

These disputes must transcend minor dialectical variations. It is improbable that a difference, such as the substitution of حتنى حين (hattā hin) for عتنى حين ('attā hin), would have provoked the intensity of Umar's reaction or precipitated the profound doubt experienced by Ubay. The variations, therefore, must have possessed a degree of substantive significance to elicit such strong responses.

Why didn't Muhammad explicitly and publicly clarify to all Muslims, for example in a Friday sermon, that the Quran was revealed in seven ahruf, which could have prevented the repeated disputes among the companions?

Furthermore, the apparent lack of widespread dissemination of this crucial information following the initial incidents warrants scrutiny. Especially considering that at least two of these disputes unfolded publicly within the mosque, in the presence of numerous witnesses, the limited propagation of the "seven ahruf" doctrine is perplexing.

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Moreover, the daily practice of congregational prayers, during which the Quran was recited aloud thrice daily, introduces another layer of complexity. If Muhammad consistently employed a singular recitation style in these public prayers, encounters with divergent recitations would predictably lead to inquiries and requests for clarification. And in this case, everyone would be aware of the existence of different recitations of the Quranic text. Conversely, if Muhammad himself varied his recitations during public prayers, the existence of multiple readings should have been common knowledge within the community, rendering the surprise and disputes less explicable.

Sources:

- 1 - *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Damascus, 1993, p. 1909.
- 2 - *Sahih Muslim*, Cairo 1955, p. 561.
- 3 - *Sahih Ibn Habban*, Beirut, 2012, vol. 2, p. 167
- 4 - Abu Ubaid, *Fada'il al-Quran*, Beirut, 1995, p. 337.

For texts with DeepL translation:

<https://archive.org/details/49-1.20250208>

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- 4706 «حدثنا سعيد بن عفیر قال: حدثی الیث قال: حدثی عقیل، عن ابن شهاب قال: حدثی عروة بن الزبیر: أن المسور بن مخرمة وعبد الرحمن بن عبد القاری حدثا: أنهما سمعا عمر بن الخطاب يقول: سمعت هشام بن حکیم يقرأ سورۃ الفرقان فی حیاة رسول الله، فاستمعت لقراءته، فإذا هو يقرأ علی حروف كثیرة لم يقرئنها رسول الله، فکدت أساوره فی الصلاة، فتصبرت حتی سلم، فلیته برداه فقلت: من أقرأك هذه السورۃ التي سمعتک تقرأ؟ قال: أقرأنيها رسول الله، فقلت: كذبت، فان رسول الله قد أقرأنيها علی غير ما قرأت، فانطلقت به أقوده إلی رسول الله، فقلت: إبی سمعت هذا يقرأ بسورۃ الفرقان علی حروف لم تقرئنها، فقل رسول الله: (أرسله، اقرأ يا هشام). قرأ علیه القراءة التي سمعته يقرأ، فقال رسول الله: (كذلك أنزلت). ثم قال: (اقرأ يا عمر). فقرأت القراءة التي أقرأني، فقال رسول الله: (كذلك أنزلت).

صحیح البخاری، دمشق 1993، ج ص 1909.

DeepL translation:

"4706 - Sa'id ibn 'Afir said: Al-Leith said: 'Aqeel told me about Ibn Shihab, who said: 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr told me: Al-Masur ibn Mukhrima and Abdul Rahman ibn Abdul Qari told him that they heard 'Umar ibn al-Khattab say: They heard 'Umar ibn al-Khattab say: I heard Hisham ibn Hakim reading Surat al-Furqan during the life of the Messenger of Allah, so I listened to his reading, and if he was reading on many letters that the Messenger of Allah did not read to me, I was almost upset with him in prayer, so I was patient until he prayed, so I wrapped him in his robe and said: "Who read you this Surat al-Furqan that I heard you reading?" He said: "The Messenger of Allah read it to me, so I said: "You lie, the Messenger of Allah has read it to me differently from what you read, so I went to lead him to the Messenger of Allah and said: I heard this man reading Surat al-Furqan on letters you did not read to me, so the Messenger of Allah said: Send him. He read the reading that I heard him read, and Allah's Apostle said, "That is how it was

revealed. Then he said: "Read, 'Umar. The Messenger of Allah said, 'Send him, read the reading I heard him read, and the Messenger of Allah said, 'So it was revealed.

Sahih al-Bukhari, Damascus, 1993, p. 1909.

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«273 - (820) حَدَّثَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ نُمَيْرٍ. حَدَّثَنَا أَبِي إِسْمَاعِيلَ بْنَ أَبِي خَالِدٍ عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَيْسَى بْنِ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ أَبْنَى لَيْلَى، عَنْ أَبِي بْنِ كَعْبٍ، قَالَ: كُنْتُ فِي الْمَسْجِدِ فَدَخَلَ رَجُلٌ يَصْلِي. فَقَرَا قِرَاءَةً أَنْكَرْتُهَا عَلَيْهِ. ثُمَّ دَخَلَ أَخْرَى. فَقَرَا قِرَاءَةً سَوْيَ قِرَاءَةِ صَاحِبِهِ. فَلَمَّا قَضَيْنَا الصَّلَاةَ دَخَلَنَا جَمِيعًا عَلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ. قَلَّلْتُ إِنْ هَذَا قِرَاءَةً أَنْكَرْتُهَا عَلَيْهِ. وَدَخَلَ أَخْرَى فَقَرَا سَوْيَ قِرَاءَةِ صَاحِبِهِ. فَأَمَرَهُمَا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ فَقَرَا. فَحَسِنَ النَّبِيُّ شَانَهُمَا. فَسَقَطَ

في نفسي من التكذيب. ولا إذا كنت في الجاهلية. فلما رأى رسول الله ما قد غشيني ضرب في صدرني. فقضت عرقا. وكانت أنيطت إلى الله فرقا. فقال لي "يا أبا! أرسل إلى: أن أقرأ القرآن على حرف. فردت إليه: أن هون على أمتي. فرد إلى الثانية: أقرأ على حرفين. فردت إليه: أن هون على أمتي. فرد إلى الثالثة: أقرأ على سبعة أحرف. فلك بكل ردة ردتها مسألة تسأليتها. قلت: اللهم! اغفر لأمتي. وأخرت الثالثة ليوم ير غب إلى الخلق كلهم. حتى إبراهيم»

صحيح مسلم، القاهرة 1955، ص 561.

DeepL translation:

"273 - (820) We spoke with Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Numair. We talked to my father. Ismail ibn Abi Khalid told us about Abdullah ibn Isa ibn Abdulrahman ibn Abi Laila, from his grandfather, from Abi ibn Ka'b; he said:

I was in the mosque. A man entered praying. He read a reading that I disapproved of. Then another man entered. He read a reading other than that of his companion. When we finished the prayer, we all entered the Messenger of Allah. I said: "This man read a reading that I disliked. Another came in and read other than his companion. Allah's Apostle ordered them to read. The Prophet favored them. So I fell in my soul from disbelief. Not if I was in jahiliyyah. When the Messenger of Allah saw what had happened to me, he struck me in the chest. I broke out in sweat. It was as if I was looking at God for fear. He said to me, "O my father! Send me: Recite the Qur'an on a letter. I replied to him: "Make it easy for my Ummah. He sent me the second: Read it in two letters. I replied to him: "Make it easy for my Ummah. He replied to me the third time: Read it on seven letters. For every reply you give, you will have a question to ask. I said: O Allah! Forgive my nation. I delayed the third one for a day when he would desire all of creation. Even Ibrahim"

Sahih Muslim, Cairo 1955, p. 561.

1108- «أَخْرَنَا مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ يَعْقُوبَ الْخَطِيبَ بِالْأَهْوَازِ، قَالَ: حَدَثَنَا عَامِرُ بْنُ مُدْرِكٍ، قَالَ: حَدَثَنَا إِسْرَائِيلُ، عَنْ عَاصِيٍّ، عَنْ زِيرٍ، عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ مِسْعَودٍ، قَالَ: أَقْرَأَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ سُورَةَ الرَّحْمَنَ، فَخَرَجْتُ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ عَشِيرَةً، فَجَلَسْتُ إِلَيْ رَهْبَنَةٍ، فَقَلَّتْ لِرَجُلٍ: أَقْرَأَ عَلَيَّ، فَإِذَا هُوَ يَقْرَأُ حَرْفًا لَا أَقْرَأُهَا، فَقَلَّتْ: مَنْ أَقْرَأَكَ؟ قَالَ: أَقْرَأَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ، فَأَنْطَلَقْنَا حَتَّىٰ وَقَفَنَا عَلَىِ النَّبِيِّ، فَقَلَّتْ: أَخْلَقْنَا فِي زَرَاعَتِنَا، فَإِذَا وَجَهَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ فِيهِ تَعْثِيرٌ، وَوُجِدَ فِي نَفْسِهِ جِنٌّ كَثِيرٌ إِلَخْتِلَافٍ، قَالَ: إِنَّمَا هَلَكَ مَنْ قَبَلَكُمْ بِالْإِخْتِلَافِ، فَأَمَرَنِي عَلَيْهِ، قَالَ: إِنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ يَقْرَأُ كُلُّ رَجُلٍ مِنْكُمْ كَمَا عَلِمْ، إِنَّمَا هَلَكَ مَنْ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمُ الْإِخْتِلَافُ، قَالَ: فَأَنْطَلَقْنَا وَكُلُّ رَجُلٌ مَنْ يَقْرَأُ حَرْفًا لَا يَقْرَأُهُ صَاحِبَهُ».

صحيح ابن حبان، بيروت 2012، ج 2 ص 167.

DeepL translation:

- 1108"Mu'ammār ibn Sahl, said: 'Amīr ibn Mūdarīk, said: 'Amīr ibn Mūdarīk, said: Israel, from 'Asīm, from Zīr, from 'Abdullāh ibn Mā'sud, said: The Messenger of Allāh read to me the Surah al-Rahmān, so I went out to the mosque one evening, and a group of people sat down to me: "Read to me," and I said to a man: "Who read you?" He said: "I read it to you." "Who read to you?" He said, "The Messenger of Allāh read to me." We went on until we stood before the Prophet, and I said: We differed in our recitation, and the face of the Messenger of Allāh changed, and he felt a change in his soul when I mentioned the disagreement, and he said, "The people before you perished through disagreement." He then ordered Ali and said: "The Messenger of Allāh commands each of you to recite as he has been taught, for what destroyed those who were before you was disagreement." He said: We went away, each of us reciting a letter that his companion did not recite".

Sahih Ibn Habban, Beirut, 2012, vol. 2, p. 167

حدثنا عبد الله بن صالح، عن الليث، عن يزيد بن الهاد، عن محمد بن إبراهيم، عن بسر بن سعيد، عن أبي قيس مولى عمرو بن العاص، أن رجلاً قرأ آية من القرآن، فقال له عمرو بن العاص: إنما هي كذلك وكذا بغير ما قرأ الرجل، فقال الرجل: هكذا أقرانيها رسول الله، فخرجا إلى رسول الله حتى أتياه، فذكرا ذلك له، فقال رسول الله: «إن هذا القرآن نزل على سبعة أحرف، فأي ذلك قراتم أصيتم، فلا تماروا في القرآن، فإن مراء فيه كفر»

أبو عبيد، *فضائل القرآن*، بيروت 1995، ص 337.

DeepL translation:

"Abdullah ibn Salih told us about Al-Leith, about Yazid ibn Al-Had, about Muhammad ibn Ibrahim, about Bisr ibn Saeed, about Abu Qais, the servant of Amr ibn Al-As, that a man recited a verse of the Qur'an: The man said: "This is how the Messenger of Allah read it to me." They went to the Messenger of Allah until they came to him and mentioned this to him, and the Messenger of Allah said: "This Qur'an was revealed on seven letters, so whichever one you read, you are correct, but do not dispute in the Qur'an, for disputing in it is blasphemy".

Abu Ubaid, *Fada'il al-Quran*, Beirut, 1995, p. 337.